

12

which a database of vehicle particulars are stored. Reference particulars corresponding to the registration number are then retrieved from the memory 22 and displayed on the display 24. The reference particulars typically include the make, colour, model etc. of the vehicle and the supervisor then visually compares these particulars with the vehicle parked in the parking bay. In the event of there being a mismatch between the reference particulars and the observed particulars, the supervisor may then alert the relevant authorities by communicating a warning signal to the base station 16 associated with the particular remote unit 18.

Further, the memory 22 includes comprehensive details on vehicles which are being illegally used e.g. stolen vehicles or the like. The processor unit 28 thus compares the registration number which has been fed in via the keypad 26 with a database of stolen vehicles in the memory 22 and, if the comparison is positive, the processor unit 28 activates the warning LED 30 thereby to alert the supervisor. The supervisor may then double check that the vehicle registration number which he has fed in via the keypad 26 is correct by comparing the observed registration number of the vehicle with the particulars entered in via the keypad 26 and which are displayed on the display 24. If the correct registration number has in fact been entered, the warning signal may be either automatically, or in response to an action of the supervisor, be transmitted via the cellular interface 36 to the associated base station 16. The associated base station 16 may then alert the relevant authorities e.g. the police or the like. It is however to be appreciated that, instead of the cellular communication link 20, a radio link, a wired link via a conventional hardwired telephone system, an Internet link or the like may be used to communicate between the base

13

station 16 and the remote unit 18 or used to communicate between the base stations 16 and the control centre 13.

In addition to entering the vehicle registration number into the remote unit 18, each parking bay 12 associated with the specific remote unit 18 is numbered and an identification number of the specific parking bay is also entered into the remote unit 18 via the keypad 26. Once parking of the vehicle in the specific parking bay has been authorised, timing means defined by the processor unit 28 for timing the duration of the vehicle in the parking bay is then initialised. The processor unit 28 retrieves reference data from the memory 22 which may be selectively downloaded into the memory 22 from the base station 16. The processor unit 28 then calculates the rate of charge dependent on the time of day, day of the week, class of parking area, or the like.

The display 24 is typically a ten line 30 digit LCD display which, under control of the processor unit 28, displays the registration number of the vehicle, the number of the parking bay in which the vehicle is parked, the time and date, the rate per hour for use of the parking bay, or the like. Once the supervisor has received payment for use of the parking bay and entered payment details into the remote unit 18 via the key pad 26, the display may confirm payment by displaying "Thank you. Payment made before departure. Pay only the amount on the screen". It is to be appreciated however that any other messages may be displayed on the display 24. The processor unit 28 may thus keep financial records of the financial transactions that take place during the course of the day and may then transmit comprehensive details to its associated base station 16. The base station 16 also includes processor

14

means for generating statistics on the use of the various parking bays, running accounts on the total amount of cash received or the like.

In the event of the user not paying the supervisor the required amount, the remote unit 18 may communicate the reference particulars of the vehicle to the base station 16 which may then notify the relevant local authorities in order to take legal action. In order to facilitate payment to the supervisor, the reading means 38 is provided for receiving smart cards, credit cards, or the like. A facility is typically provided in the remote unit 18 to provide benefits for regular or monthly parking users. In certain embodiments, the remote unit 18 includes a transponder interrogator for interrogating an electronic tag provided on the vehicle. The electronic tag includes the identification particulars of the vehicle. In other embodiments, the electronic tag may be provided in the form of a key-ring.

The remote unit 18 is arranged so that the user may prepay for use of the bay for a specific period of time or pay the supervisor upon returning to collect the vehicle. In the event of the user prepaying the supervisor, the printer 32 may print the appropriate receipt in advance. However, in the event of the user only paying the supervisor upon returning to the vehicle, the identification number of the parking bay is entered into the portable unit 18 which then displays the registration number of the vehicle presently parked in the bay. The processor unit 28 then calculates the amount due and display 24 then indicates that this amount must be paid directly to the attendant. It is to be appreciated that they display 24 may then further display various other messages such as "Not paid yet", "If not paid legal action will follow from the local authority" or the like.